



ISSUE FOCUS
SEPTEMBER
2017

An Early Look at the Career Ready Internship Program

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While a college degree offers the opportunity for increased income, a degree alone does not guarantee a student’s successful entry into the workforce. Work-based learning, such as internships and apprenticeship programs, has become an increasingly popular way to help students build workforce skills and experience and gain real-world exposure to a career in the field of their interest.¹ For employers, such programs provide labor while also building a talent pipeline, which many have argued is lacking in the current U.S. workforce.² But despite their potential and popularity, a lack of consistent standards for internship programs has led to much variability in their quality and structure, with many providing less-than-ideal work experiences.³ Moreover, a large proportion of internships are unpaid, making it difficult for low-income students to participate and creating inequities between their career experiences and those of students who can afford to work for free. Finally, school districts and colleges struggle to develop enough internship slots to meet student demand.⁴

One recently created internship program is exploring how to address these challenges. In 2015, Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation (Great Lakes) awarded \$12.2 million to selected four-year colleges in Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin to develop semester-long paid internships for college juniors and seniors with financial needs. In 2016, MDRC began researching the implementation, scaling, and sustainability of the Career Ready Internship (CRI) program, as well as employers’, students’, and colleges’ experiences with the program. The research team has disseminated two surveys — one to student participants and another to employers — and is examining multiple years of program data as well as progress reports that colleges submitted to Great Lakes. This issue focus provides a brief overview of the CRI program in the context of recent research on internships and a snapshot of early findings from the study.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS, AND HOW DOES CRI COMPARE?

Despite the popularity of internship and apprenticeship programs, research on their implementation and effectiveness is relatively limited, particularly at the college level. However, several studies have examined the impact of similar types of internship programs on high school students, with promising results. For instance, the Urban Alliance, in a randomized controlled trial, found that the completion of high school internships increased young men’s college-going rate by 23 percentage points and raised the likelihood of middle-tier students (with grade point averages of 2.0 to 3.0) enrolling in a four-year college by 17 percentage points — while also helping students gain im-

¹Charlotte Cahill, *Making Work-Based Learning Work* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2016).

²Lindsay Page, “Understanding the Impact of Career Academy Attendance: An Application of the Principal Stratification Framework for Causal Effects Accounting for Partial Compliance,” *Evaluation Review* 36, no. 2 (2012), 99-132; James Kemple, *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Work, Education, and Transitions to Adulthood* (New York: MDRC, 2008); Cahill, *Making Work-Based Learning Work*.

³National Academy Foundation, *Preparing Youth for Life: The Gold Standards for High School Internships* (New York: National Academy Foundation, 2010).

⁴Edwin Koc, Andrea Koncz, Kenneth Tsang, and Anna Longenberger, *The Class of 2014 Student Survey Report: Results from NACE’s Annual Survey of College Students* (Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2014); Cahill, *Making Work-Based Learning Work*.

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portant workforce skills.⁵ And a long-term randomized controlled trial of high school career academies, which combined career-technical education with an academic curriculum and provided some students with internships with local employers, found that the programs had large, positive, and sustained impacts on students' labor market outcomes eight years later.⁶ A subsequent study reanalyzed the data and suggested that these impacts were probably driven by internship experiences.⁷

Experts on high school internship programs tend to agree that the programs should include certain types of experiences and practices, many of which apply to college students. For instance, they have argued that internships should offer students real, relevant work experiences tied to their majors or career pathways while also providing employers with valuable work that furthers their companies' goals. They recommend that internship programs should incorporate structured support for students, such as transportation assistance and opportunities for students to reflect on what they have learned. Finally, many experts recommend that internships provide meaningful wages, academic credit, or other forms of payment to participating students in order to reduce inequity.⁸

In developing the CRI program, Great Lakes set out a list of criteria for participating colleges that align with those recommendations:

- **Target students with financial needs.** Colleges were required to provide detailed descriptions of how they would assess students' financial aid status.⁹
- **Provide wages.** Colleges were required to pay students at least the legal minimum wage.
- **Provide part-time internships** in order not to interfere with students' academics and to ensure that as many students as possible can participate.
- **Provide meaningful work experiences.** Colleges had to describe how the internships would be connected with students' career interests and help them build applicable skills.
- **Provide transportation funds, where possible.** Great Lakes provided a pool of money that could be used for student wages and to support students' transportation to and from the work site.
- **Work with multiple departments.** College programs were required to describe how they would work with other departments, such as their financial aid offices, human resources departments, or grants programs, to ensure that low-income students were recruited and supported in the CRI program.
- **Build contacts with employers and develop new internships.** Colleges had to describe the internship opportunities they offered previously and how they would expand these under CRI, including developing new employer contacts.
- **Ensure sustainability.** Colleges were required to supply 10 percent of intern wages and transportation funding in the second year of the program and 20 percent in the third year.

⁵Brett Theodos, Mike Pergamit, Devlin Hanson, Sara Edelstein, Rebecca Daniels, and Tanaya Srini, *Pathways After High School: Evaluation of the Urban Alliance High School Internship Program* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2017).

⁶Kemple, *Career Academies*.

⁷Kemple, *Career Academies*; Page, "Understanding the Impact of Career Academy Attendance."

⁸National Academy Foundation, *Preparing Youth for Life*; Cahill, *Making Work-Based Learning Work*.

⁹Colleges were required to target students who were eligible for grants or loans as determined by their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

AN INITIAL LOOK AT HOW COLLEGES ARE IMPLEMENTING THE CRI PROGRAM

Great Lakes selected 33 four-year colleges to participate in the CRI program through a competitive request for proposal process. Colleges received funding beginning in September 2015 and were expected to spend the first three months of the grant reaching out to employers, developing the CRI program, and recruiting students. Colleges were then expected to begin offering CRI internships to students in the spring 2016 semester and gradually build up the program through spring 2018.

Initial analyses of colleges' progress reports,¹⁰ CRI program data, and surveys of students and employers from fall 2016 and spring 2017¹¹ reveal that the internship programs followed most of the Great Lakes requirements. For instance, CRI programs tended to work with multiple departments and individuals throughout the college, including faculty, alumni offices, financial aid offices, and career services, to build employer contacts, recruit students, and check students' eligibility for the program. Staff members also tended to have multiple contacts with employers throughout each semester via email, phone, in-person visits, or career fairs.

Based on analysis of program characteristics from spring, summer, and fall 2016, most colleges reported developing from 10 to 39 CRI internships per semester. Most colleges partnered mainly with employers in the nonprofit or government sectors to offer their internships, and the majority of colleges (85 percent or more each semester) paid students an average wage of \$10 to \$14 an hour. Though all the internships were part time, at a majority of colleges (60 percent or more), students averaged 100 to 160 hours in the spring and fall semesters and 140 to 200 or more hours during the summer.

Though colleges paid more than the national minimum wage of \$7.25, fewer than half the colleges provided transportation funding. Analyses of colleges' progress reports indicate that some students may have been unable to attend their internships because of transportation issues.

Despite some difficulties, students who replied to the survey reported highly positive experiences with the CRI program. A large majority (more than 75 percent) saw their internships as relevant to their careers and useful in expanding their professional networks. CRI students had very high persistence rates: At a majority of colleges every CRI student either graduated from college at the end of the semester or reenrolled at the college the following semester. However, recruitment details were unavailable, and the students recruited may have already been high performers.

LOOKING AHEAD

The MDRC research team will continue to analyze the implementation of CRI through 2018, and the next report, in 2019, will provide a deeper analysis of the program, including its recruitment and support of student interns and ongoing work with local employers, and explore lessons that other programs can use to build on this work.

¹⁰ Colleges are required to submit eight progress reports over the course of the CRI programs. After a planning period report, reports are submitted in the fall, spring, and summer from July 2016 through July 2018.

¹¹ MDRC disseminated surveys to CRI interns via participating colleges in fall 2016 and spring 2017. MDRC does not have personally identifiable data on students and so cannot provide exact response rates. There were 853 responses to the student survey and 683 responses to the employer survey across the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters combined; based on this and other information, the research team estimates overall response rates of greater than 50 percent for fall 2016. The data needed to estimate spring 2017 response rates were not yet available.